



A Survey Study of the Pakistan Study Centers of Chinese Universities under the Context of the Belt and Road Initiative

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Abstract: This paper explores the development of Pakistan Study Centers (PSCs) within Chinese universities and their crucial role in strengthening the academic, cultural, and policy ties between China and Pakistan. These PSCs have emerged as essential platforms for fostering a deeper understanding of Pakistan's history, culture, society, politics, and economy. This study comprehensively examines the historical context, geographical distribution, development stages, research areas, achievements, and challenges faced by these centers. It answers key questions about their establishment and significance, provides an overview of the 21 PSCs across China, and offers expertise on diverse aspects of China-Pakistan relations. This research highlights Pakistan's strategic significance to China and emphasizes the importance of academic and cultural exchanges in strengthening bilateral relations. The study reveals a growing commitment to academic and research collaboration, with each PSC focusing on specialized areas, including security, economics, culture, politics, and more. These centers also act as think tanks, policy advisors, and talent incubators, contributing to the sustainable development of Pakistan studies in China. However, challenges such as limited funding, language barriers, talent development, research depth, and the absence of unified information-sharing mechanisms pose hurdles for PSCs. To address these issues, recommendations are presented, emphasizing the allocation of financial resources, the importance of language proficiency, nurturing a talent pipeline, facilitating fieldwork opportunities, establishing collaboration mechanisms, and developing a global perspective. Furthermore, fostering academic collaboration with Pakistani counterparts is proposed to strengthen international cooperation and extend the long-term vision of the PSCs.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative; China-Pakistan Economic Corridor; Pakistan Study Centers; China-Pakistan relations; academic cooperation; higher education internationalization; cultural exchange; South Asian studies.

1. Introduction:

The "Belt and Road" Initiative (BRI) represents a significant endeavor by China to establish a new paradigm of international relations focused on mutually beneficial cooperation and the creation of a shared human destiny ([International Scholarship, 2022](#)). With a longstanding history of friendship, Pakistan holds a pivotal role as a traditional ally and a key participant in the "Belt and Road" initiative ([Chang, 2019](#)). It serves as an important pivot, connecting and demonstrating a country in this grand strategy. In 2013, the leaders of China and Pakistan forged a consensus on the "China-Pakistan Economic Corridor" (CPEC) to enhance economic cooperation between the two nations and facilitate their shared development ([China, 2013](#)).

The CPEC envisions comprehensive collaboration in transportation, energy, and the maritime economy to foster stronger interconnections and mutual progress. Furthermore, in April 2015, during President Xi Jinping's visit to Pakistan, both nations elevated their relationship to an all-weather strategic cooperative partnership, signifying the depth and significance of their cooperation ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of, 2015](#)). The Roundtable Summit of the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, held in May 2017 in Beijing, provided fresh momentum and opportunities to strengthen China-Pakistan connectivity and enhance pragmatic cooperation. Developing academic and research collaborations between countries plays a crucial role in fostering international understanding, promoting cultural exchanges, and enhancing bilateral

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relations(Ling). In the context of the BRI, a comprehensive global development strategy initiated by China, the establishment of Pakistan Study Centers (PSCs) in Chinese universities has emerged as a notable milestone in strengthening the academic ties between China and Pakistan. This study aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the PSCs established in various Chinese universities and institutions. With the BRI aiming to enhance connectivity, infrastructure, and economic cooperation along ancient trade routes (Antwi, 2023), it has also fostered significant academic cooperation. The PSCs in Chinese universities serve as important platforms for promoting research, fostering knowledge exchange, and deepening understanding of Pakistan's history, culture, society, politics, and economy.

Specifically, the study is going to answer the following questions: What is the historical context and motivations behind the establishment of PSCs in Chinese universities? What is the significance of the geographical distribution of PSCs across China, and how does it align with China's foreign policy, international engagement, and academic endeavors? What are the different stages in the development of these PSCs, and how do they correlate with the growth of Pakistan studies in China, particularly within the context of the BRI and CPEC? What are the specific academic programs, research areas, and achievements of these PSCs, and how do they contribute to the academic, cultural, and policy aspects of China-Pakistan relations? What are the challenges for the PSCs in China, and what corresponding recommendations can be put forward?

2. Literature review

The study of Pakistan in China began in the 1950s with the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries. However, existing research on Pakistan in China is shallow and primarily provides a general overview of Pakistan's history, economy, and culture. Chinese scholars have relied heavily on research from other countries, particularly the Soviet Union and India, while not fully utilizing the findings of Pakistani scholars. Additionally, translations of Pakistani research were predominantly conducted in the late 1950s and early 1960s, indicating a need for more comprehensive and updated research efforts on Pakistan in China (Dyakov, 1951).

In 1951, Panlang translated the book *India and Pakistan* by Soviet scholar Dyakov. The 67-page book provides a brief overview of the history of India and Pakistan before 1947. Another Soviet scholar, Ljubchikov (1956), contributed a 34-page booklet on Pakistan that lacks sufficient detail on all aspects of the country.

In 1957, *Pakistan Today*, edited by Maklang, offered a somewhat more detailed account of Pakistan. During this period, translations of books on Pakistan's economy and culture became more common. For instance, *The Agricultural Laborers of India and Pakistan* provides an overview of the situation of agricultural laborers in both countries. Additionally, *Pakistan's Economy and Foreign Trade* provides an overview and commentary on Pakistan's economic and trade situation (Zemayev, 1957).

These works were authored by Urdu students from the Department of Oriental Languages at Peking University and the Shanghai Institute of Foreign Languages. Furthermore, two collections of poetry, *The Breakdown of the Prison: Modern Urdu Poetry from India and Pakistan* and *Selected Poems of the Peace Soldiers of India, Pakistan, and Burma*, introduced some of Pakistan's most famous poems to China (Rashi, 1958). The translation team from the Department of Foreign Languages at Sichuan University achieved the most remarkable translation feat of this period with the four-volume book *A Brief History of Pakistan* (Dhani, 1974).

From the 1950s to 2000, the strengthening of Sino-Pakistani relations sparked Chinese scholars' interest in studying Pakistan. Notably, two significant books, *Pakistan* and *Pakistan Chronicle*, offer an extensive examination of Pakistan's history, culture, economy, and politics, serving as valuable resources for research on Pakistan (Lingzhi, 1980). Additionally, Liu Lesheng's edited volume, *Pakistan*, and Yang Cuibai and Li Dechang's edited volume, *Contemporary Pakistan*, provide timely and comprehensive information across various dimensions of Pakistan.

These publications vividly depict Pakistan's profile and serve as essential references for understanding its overall condition. Li Dechang's works, *Political Development of Pakistan* and *Economic Development of Pakistan*, are indispensable sources for studying Pakistan (Dechang, 1989, 1992; Lesheng, 1988). The former explores Pakistan's political evolution from 1947 to 1987, while the latter focuses on its economic progress,



analyzing the strategies formulated by successive governments. These books describe the economic development plans, achievements, and challenges in sectors such as agriculture, finance, and foreign relations.

Qiu Yonghui's *Economic Reforms and Democratization Waves in South Asian Countries: A Study of India and Pakistan* sheds light on economic reforms in India and Pakistan and their correlation with democratization waves. Furthermore, Chen Hongguang's reportage, *The Chinese in Pakistan*, provides valuable insights into the lives of Chinese residents in Pakistan, representing the first Chinese book to depict their experiences. During this period, China made significant efforts to translate and publish a wide range of works on Pakistani culture, including novels, folklore, literature, and biographies ([Hongguang, 1997](#); [Yonghui, 1998](#)). These publications have played a pivotal role in deepening scholars' understanding of Pakistani culture.

Entering the 21st century, studies on Pakistan gained popularity. One of the most significant developments in Pakistan Studies during this period is the deepening of Pakistan-China relations, driven by the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Scholars have extensively studied this relationship, highlighting its strategic importance in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Authors such as Dossani and Row in *CPEC: Master Plan* have explored the economic implications of CPEC, emphasizing its potential to transform the region's economic landscape ([Abbas, 1984](#)).

Despite close alliances and high-level cooperation across various domains, scholarly work on Pakistan Studies in China remains limited. Few Chinese scholars specialize in Pakistan Studies, and only a handful possess proficiency in Urdu. Consequently, overall academic and research contributions from China in this field have been relatively sparse ([Hinton, 1987](#)). The Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan in Beijing reports that, by 2017, only seven Pakistan Study Centers existed in China ([Dossani & Row, 2017](#)). Research on Pakistan Study Centers (PSCs) in Chinese universities remains limited.

3. Research Method

This study employs a mixed-method research approach to comprehensively examine the PSCs established within Chinese universities in the context of the BRI. The research design integrates qualitative and quantitative methods to gain a holistic understanding of the establishment, objectives, activities, and impacts of these centers. A literature review examines existing research on PSCs, the BRI, and the CPEC. Academic databases, including CNKI, Google Scholar, and other relevant sources, are searched for studies, publications, reports, and academic papers related to PSCs and their contributions to BRI and CPEC. The review identifies gaps in the current literature and areas necessitating further investigation.

3.1 Data Collection

The official websites of the PSCs are visited to collect data on their objectives, research areas, publications, collaborations, and historical development. News reports from authentic media sources are used as references when some official websites are not functioning correctly.

3.2 Interviews and Meetings

Given that some PSCs do not have official websites, structured interviews are conducted with the heads and staff of those PSCs. Interview questionnaires are designed to ensure consistency and to cover topics such as objectives, achievements, challenges, and long-term goals. Meetings, both online and in person, are organized with members of the PSCs to gain insight into their roles, contributions, and experiences in academia, diplomacy, and research activities.

3.3 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis is employed to analyze interviews and meeting notes. Common themes, motivations for PSC establishment, roles in BRI and CPEC, and the impact on academic and diplomatic relations are identified. Data from official websites is summarized and statistically analyzed. Figures and tables are created to visualize trends and patterns in PSC activities. A comparative analysis is conducted to contrast the objectives, research areas, and achievements of different PSCs. Variations across China's geographical regions are examined, and factors contributing to the success of specific centers are identified.

3.4 Case Studies

Select PSCs are chosen for in-depth case studies to provide a comprehensive understanding based on the study's purpose. Some cases are discussed to illustrate how PSCs work and the challenges they face.

3.5 Implications and Recommendations

Based on the research findings, implications, and recommendations, proposals are made for both the Chinese and Pakistani academic communities regarding the role and enhancement of PSCs in supporting BRI and CPEC.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

The research adheres to ethical standards, including obtaining informed consent for interviews, respecting privacy and confidentiality, and avoiding conflicts of interest.

4. Overview of the Pakistan Study Centers

Pakistan is an important neighboring country for China, holding a unique and significant place in Chinese diplomacy. On January 4, 1950, Pakistan became the first Muslim country, the second Commonwealth country, and the third non-communist country to recognize the People's Republic of China (Dhani, 1974). On May 21, 1950, Pakistan and China formally established diplomatic relations. Since then, China and Pakistan have maintained a close cooperative relationship that has deepened over the years, leading to the establishment of an all-weather strategic partnership.

China and Pakistan's relationship dates to the mid-20th century, when Pakistan recognized the newly established People's Republic of China (Lingzhi, 1980). Their diplomatic, economic, and military ties have grown stronger over the years, evolving into a full-fledged strategic partnership (Dossani & Row, 2017). The closeness of this relationship is evident across various domains, including trade, infrastructure development, counter-terrorism cooperation, and international affairs. The two countries engage in extensive collaboration in joint economic projects, cultural exchanges, and military exercises (Wei et al., 2017).

In the backdrop of BRI and CPEC, domestic universities in China have increasingly turned their attention to the comprehensive study of Pakistan. Over the period from 2007 to 2022, Chinese universities established 21 research centers to explore various aspects of Pakistan in depth.

These centers are actively engaged in high-level, multidisciplinary research projects and exchange programs, reflecting their commitment to serving China's national strategic interests and elevating the internationalization of higher education within the country. The proliferation of these PSCs in China underscores Pakistan's significance in the context of the BRI and CPEC and highlights broader implications for the evolving China-Pakistan relationship. The 21 PSCs, listed in chronological order of their establishment, are in different provinces across China, as seen in Table 1.

Table 1: Pakistan Research Centers in Chinese Universities. (Source: Developed by the author by collecting data from various databases)

N o.	Year	Province	City	University/Institution	Key Research Areas
1	2007	Beijing	Beijing	Tsinghua University	Policy research, cross-cultural communication, international relations, media development research
2	2008	Beijing	Beijing	Peking University	Pakistan and the South Asian subcontinent, promoting Pakistan's culture and language exchange
3	2008	Sichuan	Chengdu	Sichuan University	Academic research on Pakistan, related academic lectures, funding for research projects, and academic conferences
4	2009	Shanghai	Shanghai	Fudan University	Economics, historical environment, business management, international relations, and strategic studies
5	2011	Jiangsu	Xuzhou	Jiangsu Normal University	Pakistani history, language and culture, religious and social relations, economic and trade, domestic and international political situations



6	2013	Sichuan	Nanchong	China West Normal University	Pakistani security, diplomacy, politics, economics, culture, history, religion, and ethnic issues, as well as the interactions between Pakistan and neighboring countries and major world powers
7	2014	Inner Mongolia	Hohhot	Inner Mongolia Honder College of Arts and Sciences	CPEC, educational exchanges, and research projects on security, energy, and economics. Academic calibration with Pakistani institutes and centers.
8	2016	Beijing	Beijing	Beijing Technology and Business University	China-Pakistan science and economics, research, and exchange studies
9	2016	Xinjiang	Kashgar	Kashgar University	Economic, historical, and cultural research on Pakistan and the Kashgar-Pakistan relationship
10	2016	Yunnan	Kunming	Yunnan University for Nationalities	Political, economic, cultural, and social research on Pakistan, South Asian regional studies, and studies on specific South Asian countries
11	2017	Hubei	Wuhan	China University of Geosciences (Wuhan)	Providing national situation reports, decision-making consulting services to the Chinese and Pakistani governments/ enterprises, and providing teaching and training for the cultivation and reserve of talents for China and Pakistan
12	2017	Guangdong	Guangzhou	South China University of Technology	CPEC, China-India-Pakistan relations, and projects related to the BRI
13	2017	Jiangxi	Ganzhou	Jiangxi University of Science and Technology	China-Pakistan education cooperation and exchange, equal and cultural use of China-Pakistan relations, Pakistan's image in China, mining investment in Pakistan, China-Pakistan non-ferrous metal cooperation, and government advisory services
14	2017	Hebei	Baoding	Hebei University	Intercultural communication, covering "Belt and Road" people's hearts and cultural connectivity, civilization dialogue and communication, contemporary media, cultural conflicts, media development, and civilization exchange, and mutual learning.
15	2017	Ningxia	Yinchuan	Northern Minzu University	Pakistani customs, ethnic culture, clothing, and architecture, ethnic minority policies, intangible cultural heritage protection, economic policies, social ecology, and other aspects
16	2017	Beijing	Beijing	Communication University of China	Establishing and promoting an academic system and innovative mechanism for Pakistani studies, serving the BRI; dedicating efforts to the high-level talent development and exchange in the fields of culture, arts, and media between China and Pakistan.
17	2018	Shaanxi	Xi'an	Northwest University	The diverse nature of economic and trade cooperation between China and Pakistan, multifaceted industrial investments, alignment of infrastructure development, and enriched cultural exchanges.
18	2018	Wuhu	Anhui	Anhui Normal University	Compilation of research works on Pakistan, hosting academic conferences and presentations on Pakistan.

19	2019	Yunnan	Chongqing	South and Southeast Asian Research Institute	Research on CPEC and its impact on Anhui's development, publishing the "Pakistan Research Brief. Serving the "Belt and Road" initiative and the CPEC construction
20	2019	Hebei	Shijiazhuang	Hebei Normal University	Enhancing mutual understanding and academic exchanges between scholars and young people from China and Pakistan
21	2022	Chongqing	Chongqing	Southwest University of Political Science and Law	Security in political, economic, ethnic, religious, social, and cultural fields; promotes high-end think tanks for exchanges and cooperation between China and other countries.

4.1 Geographical Distribution

Geographically, these centers are dispersed across various provinces and regions of China, reflecting the nationwide significance of the China-Pakistan relationship within the context of the BRI and CPEC.

Northern Provinces: Major urban centers such as Beijing and Shanghai host some of the earliest-established centers. Tsinghua University in Beijing, for instance, focuses on Pakistan's culture and China-Pakistan historical exchanges. Meanwhile, Fudan University in Shanghai focuses on economics, historical environments, business management, international relations, and strategic studies. These institutions serve as important hubs for academic research and policy consultations. Inner Mongolia has initiated educational exchanges and established numerous academic collaborations with Pakistani institutes and centers.

Western China: Some are in western provinces such as Xinjiang and Yunnan. These regions are particularly relevant due to their proximity to Pakistan and the CPEC. For example, Kashgar University in Xinjiang focuses on the CPEC and regional studies, providing support for decision-making and economic development. Yunnan University for Nationalities emphasizes Urdu language education, Pakistan studies, and cultural research, strengthening educational and cultural ties.

Southern China: Guangdong, Jiangxi, and Hubei provinces host study centers, each specializing in different aspects of China-Pakistan relations. These centers engage in academic exchange, high-level research, and cultural cooperation, promoting deeper people-to-people connections and understanding between the two countries.

Central China: Sichuan, Anhui, Chongqing, Hebei, and Ningxia have centers focused on international relations, particularly with the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. These centers contribute to research and insights into international relations and the broader context of China's regional and international strategies.

4.2 Year Distribution

Before the year 2000, studies on Pakistan were limited, and most focused on general introductions to Pakistan's history, economy, and culture ([Yonghui, 1998](#)). China lacked specialized institutions and academic publications dedicated to Pakistani studies, failing to cultivate a thriving field of research on Pakistan ([Mustafa & Zafar, 2017](#)). Without these dedicated research institutions, Chinese scholars predominantly examined Pakistan within the framework of South Asian studies.

For instance, the China South Asian Studies Association, founded in 1978, aimed to foster academic activities and promote international exchanges and friendship, holding domestic and international academic conferences and publishing the first Chinese academic journal dedicated to South Asian studies, "South Asian Studies." Moreover, Sichuan University's South Asian Studies Institute founded the "South Asian Studies Quarterly" in 1985, serving as a primary platform for publishing research on Pakistan.



However, it was only in the 21st century that China took a significant step toward developing PSCs. On April 14, 2007, Tsinghua University officially established the Pakistan Cultural Communication Research Center, becoming China's first institution exclusively dedicated to the study of Pakistan. This marked a crucial milestone in the strengthening of China's academic and cultural ties with Pakistan and illustrated China's commitment to fostering a comprehensive understanding of this vital South Asian nation.

The establishment of PSCs over the past 16 years demonstrates China's ongoing commitment to enhancing understanding, cooperation, and cultural exchange with Pakistan (Figure 1). The pioneering centers laid the foundation for subsequent growth, and the recent expansion aligns with China's strategic goals for the BRI and CPEC.

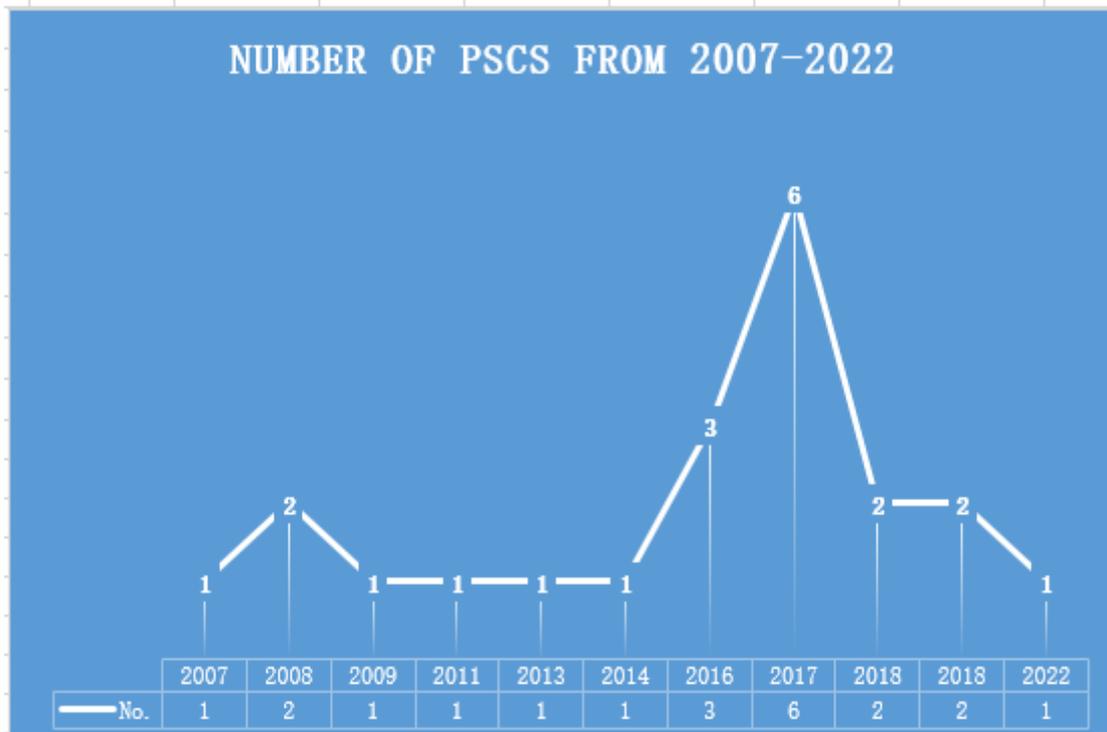


Figure 1: Number of PSCs in China from 2007 to 2022 (Source: from the author)

In 2007, the first PSC was established at Tsinghua University in Beijing, and the centers have gradually and consistently expanded over time. This expansion is a testament to China's increasing emphasis on Pakistan studies and international cooperation, particularly in the context of BRI and CPEC. The phased establishment of these centers signifies a strategic approach to building a comprehensive network of resources dedicated to the study of Pakistan. Over 16 years, the development of the PSCs can be divided into three stages.

Pioneering Centers Stage (2007-2009): The establishment of the first four centers in 2007 and 2009 is indicative of early recognition in China of the significance of Pakistan studies. Tsinghua University, Fudan University, Peking University, and Sichuan University played pioneering roles in this field. Their early engagement demonstrates their commitment to advancing understanding of Pakistan, China-Pakistan relations, and the broader South Asian region. These institutions likely set the stage for the subsequent growth of PSCs across China.

Steady Growth Stage (2016-2019): The period from 2016 to 2019 was a notable phase of expansion, during which eight new PSCs were established. This concentrated growth is the direct result of the implementation of CPEC. As the BRI and CPEC gained momentum, these new centers were established to enhance research, cooperation, and exchanges with Pakistan, focusing on various aspects of the bilateral relationship, regional dynamics, and international collaboration. The steady growth in recent years is a clear indication of China's dedication to promoting educational and cultural exchanges with Pakistan.

Continued Expansion Stage (2022): The establishment of a new center at Southwest University of Political Science and Law in Chongqing in 2022 underscores the ongoing commitment to expanding PSCs. This signifies that the growth of these centers is not limited to earlier years but is part of a continuing effort to strengthen cultural exchange, academic research, and cooperation with Pakistan. The addition of new centers also underscores Pakistan's enduring importance in China's foreign policy, international engagement, and academic endeavors.

4.3 Research Focus/Areas

As research centers, the PSCs in China have all developed academic research work between China and Pakistan. The differences among these centers lie in their specific research fields. Some centers focus on specific aspects of Pakistan, such as security, diplomacy, religion, and ethnic issues, while others have a broader scope that includes multiple disciplines.

The Pakistan Study Center at China West Normal University, for example, focuses on Pakistani security, diplomacy, politics, economics, culture, history, religion, and ethnic issues, as well as the interactions between Pakistan and neighboring countries and major world powers. On the other hand, the Pakistan Study Center at Northern Minzu University research Pakistani customs, ethnic culture, clothing, and architecture, ethnic minority policies, intangible cultural heritage protection, economic policies, social ecology, and other aspects.

Most centers engage in academic research, conduct lectures, fund research projects, host academic conferences, and provide advisory services to governments and enterprises. For instance, the Pakistan Study Center at Tsinghua University conducts academic research on Pakistani culture, China-Pakistan historical exchanges, international relations, and media development.

The Pakistan Study Center at Peking University promotes research on Pakistan and the South Asian subcontinent and facilitates cultural and language exchange. Additionally, the Pakistan Study Center at the South China University of Technology focuses on research on the CPEC, China-India-Pakistan relations, and BRI projects.

Several centers emphasize the importance of promoting cultural exchange and mutual understanding between China and Pakistan. This includes the Pakistan Study Center at Fudan University, which conducts research on economics, historical environment, business management, international relations, and strategic studies, with a focus on fostering cultural exchange and connectivity. The Pakistan Study Center at Hebei Normal University aims to enhance mutual understanding and academic exchanges between scholars and young people from China and Pakistan.

Some centers specifically contribute to the CPEC and the BRI by studying their impact and supporting related projects. The Pakistan Study Center at the South and Southeast Asian Research Institute is dedicated to serving the BRI and the construction of the CPEC. The Pakistan Study Center at Jiangxi University of Science and Technology conducts research on China-Pakistan education and non-ferrous metal cooperation and provides government advisory services.

All the above PSCs exhibit a strong commitment to international collaboration and academic exchanges. Through partnerships with research institutions and universities in more than 10 countries, these centers facilitate the exchange of knowledge, experiences, and insights on issues such as politics, economics, culture, and security. This international engagement underscores China's dedication to fostering global cooperation, enhancing cross-cultural understanding, and promoting scholarly exchanges. Such collaborations enrich research outcomes and foster multifaceted perspectives in Pakistan Studies, ultimately strengthening China's role as an active and responsible international partner.

In terms of think tanks and decision support, several centers have evolved into think tanks that provide essential decision-making consulting services to both the Chinese and Pakistani governments, as well as to enterprises operating in both countries. These centers serve as valuable sources of well-researched, informed, and unbiased insights into complex issues such as international relations, trade policies, security concerns, and economic cooperation.



By offering their expertise and in-depth analysis, these centers play a pivotal role in shaping government policies and business strategies. Their contributions support well-informed decision-making that advances the mutual interests of China and Pakistan, further solidifying the strong partnership between the two nations. In addition to their roles as research hubs and think tanks, these centers also nurture talent in the field of Pakistani studies. They offer a range of teaching and training programs designed to cultivate a new generation of experts and professionals.

These programs extend beyond the academic realm and encompass cultural exchange, language acquisition, and specialized training in fields related to Pakistan. By investing in the development of scholars and professionals, these centers ensure the sustainability of expertise and knowledge transfer in Pakistani studies. This commitment to talent development reflects China's long-term vision for enhancing academic excellence and cultural understanding between the two countries, reinforcing the foundations of a robust and enduring partnership (Faruqui, 2001).

4.4 Achievements and Significance

Table 2: Achievements and Significance of the PSCs in China. (Source: from the author)

No.	University	Achievements	Significance
1	Tsinghua University	Organized academic research/visits to Pakistan. Served as a think tank for national decision-making	Pioneering institution promoting interdisciplinary research, academic exchange, and cultural understanding between China and Pakistan.
2	Fudan University	Promotes cultural exchanges and cooperation. Participates in policy advisory work and hosts various seminars on CPEC. - Sends students to Pakistan for short-term study programs. - Collaborates with the Pakistani government, universities, and research institutions	Promotes understanding of Pakistan and China-Pakistan relations, serving as a platform for academic research and cooperation.
3	Peking University	Conducted cultural exchange and academic research in Pakistan studies. Featured experts in the Urdu language, culture, and history.	Strengthens cultural ties and academic research between China and Pakistan, offering a unique platform for research and education.
4	Sichuan University	Research on politics, economics, culture, and foreign relations in South Asia, particularly India. Conducted research projects and published academic works.	Center for specialized academic research on South Asia, contributing to Sino-Indian studies and understanding of the region's politics and economics.
5	Jiangsu Normal University	Established a library of materials related to South Asian politics, economics, and security. Actively participated in academic research and cultural exchanges.	Facilitates substantial progress in academic research and international cooperation on South Asian issues.
6	China West Normal University	Research on Pakistan's security, terrorism, ethnic and religious issues, energy projects, and foreign relations. Offered consulting services.	Provides vital intellectual support for government decision-making and fosters academic exchange, political awareness, and mutual understanding between China and Pakistan.
7	Inner Mongolia Honder College of	Specialized in research concerning Balochistan province, cultural differences in Pakistani provinces, and Chinese culture in Pakistan. Promoted Chinese language education.	Enhances China-Pakistan relations, facilitates educational exchanges, supports businesses, and conducts research on current issues in Pakistan.

	Arts and Sciences		
8	Beijing Technology and Business University	Held annual international conferences, published reports, fostered bilateral collaboration in technology and economics, and contributed to socio-economic development.	Promotes China's "Belt and Road" initiative, fosters cooperation between China and Pakistan in various sectors, and explores sustainable development along the Belt and Road.
9	Kashgar University	Became a National Ethnic Affairs Commission research center, organized international conferences, and provided decision-making support and expert consultations.	Contributes to understanding the CPEC and regional issues, supports high-level research, and aids in China-Pakistan economic development.
10	Yunnan University for Nationalities	Established Urdu language courses, set up a Pakistan research center, and researched various aspects of Pakistan's politics, economics, culture, and society.	Strengthens educational and cultural ties between China and Pakistan and offers research on various aspects of Pakistan.
11	China University of Geosciences (Wuhan)	Collaborated with institutions, supported high-level research, and promoted cultural exchange.	Provides valuable research, decision support, and cultural exchange between China and Pakistan.
12	South China University of Technology	Offered decision-making consultation services. Conducted research and published academic papers, faculty, and student exchange programs. Provided national consultation reports	Offers expertise on CPEC, cross-cultural conflict, and media communication.
13	Jiangxi University of Science and Technology	Programs on China-Pakistan educational cooperation; research on cultural equivalence and utilization, Pakistan mining investment, and China-Pakistan non-ferrous metal cooperation. Provided advisory services.	Strengthens educational and cultural collaboration between China and Pakistan, offers relevant research, and contributes to mutual understanding.
14	Hebei University	Published research papers, organized conferences, and collaborated with other research centers.	Provides research and insights on international relations, particularly with the Organization of Islamic Cooperation.
15	Northern Minzu University	Conducted research from an ethnological and anthropological perspective, offering expertise on various aspects of Pakistan. Provided advisory service to the local government.	Strengthens research on Pakistan in the context of international relations and contributes to China's regional and international strategies.
16	Communication University of China	Hosted International Conferences. Conducted regional country research projects, provided decision-making consultation, published research papers, and collaborated with other centers.	Aims to become a top-tier academic institution in Pakistan research, supporting China's Belt and Road Strategy, and enhancing people-to-people exchanges between China and Pakistan.
17	Northwest	Facilitated academic exchanges, hosted Pakistani academic groups,	Provides theoretical support and intellectual assistance for comprehensive cooperation between China and Pakistan,



	University	and participated in the "CPEC University Alliance."	including economic, cultural, and academic exchanges.
18	Anhui Normal University	Cooperated on projects related to China-Pakistan agricultural collaboration and counterterrorism. Reports were adopted at the provincial level.	Actively contributes to the development of China-Pakistan relations, including academic publications, project involvement, and international collaborations.
19	South and Southeast Asian Research Institute	Hosted national-level projects, generated high-level academic and think tank results, and served China's overseas interests.	Provides comprehensive, high-quality research, connecting China with the world across a range of issues, including economics, politics, and security.
20	Hebei Normal University	Produced academic monographs, translations, articles, and reports, and worked on multiple projects. Hosted lectures and conferences in Pakistan.	Offers academic publications, reports, and a platform for research and consulting services, contributing to the BRI.
21	Southwest University of Political Science and Law	Promoted educational, cultural, and social exchanges and cooperation between China and Pakistan. Research on challenges, problems, and solutions in regional cooperation.	With a series of primary, key, and general projects at the national level, as well as high-end academic and think-tank achievements, the enterprise is dedicated to protecting China's overseas interests.

These Chinese universities are not only fostering academic and research collaboration but also promoting cultural exchange, economic cooperation, specialized research, policy formulation, and international cooperation. Based on the above table, the following findings are highlighted. It is noted that some centers are discussed as examples, rather than listing all of them in detail.

4.5 Academic and Research Collaboration

Since the beginning, Chinese universities such as Tsinghua, Fudan, and Peking University have demonstrated a strong commitment to academic and research collaboration with Pakistan. Their endeavors extend to organizing research visits, serving as think tanks for national decision-making, and promoting interdisciplinary research.

This engagement holds immense significance, as it deepens scholarly exchange between China and Pakistan and contributes to a more profound understanding of each other's cultures, histories, and policies. Tsinghua University's pioneering role in organizing academic research and visits to Pakistan marks it as a trailblazer in building academic bridges between the two nations.

Fostering academic exchanges not only promotes research but also enhances cultural understanding, a fundamental component of robust international relations. Fudan University's multifaceted approach, which includes cultural exchanges, policy advisory work, CPEC seminars, and student exchanges with Pakistan, serves as a comprehensive platform for academic research and cooperation.

It significantly contributes to building a stronger foundation for China-Pakistan relations by enhancing mutual understanding and knowledge sharing. Peking University's focus on cultural exchange and academic research, especially in Pakistan studies and Urdu language expertise, facilitates in-depth research and education. This institution plays a critical role in strengthening cultural ties and offering a unique platform for cultural and academic collaboration. Such exchanges foster not only academic growth but also people-to-people interactions, creating lasting bonds between the two countries.

4.6 Cultural Ties and Language Education

Yunnan University for Nationalities and Inner Mongolia Honder College of Arts and Sciences have emerged as key players in enhancing cultural ties between China and Pakistan. Their focus on Urdu language courses and on research into cultural differences and Chinese culture in Pakistan is particularly significant. Yunnan University for Nationalities' establishment of Urdu language courses and a Pakistan research center not only facilitate language learning but also strengthens educational and cultural ties.

This is pivotal in fostering a deeper understanding of Pakistan's rich cultural heritage, language, and society, thereby enhancing cooperation. Inner Mongolia Honder College of Arts and Sciences' expertise in researching Balochistan province, cultural differences across Pakistani provinces, and Chinese culture in Pakistan enhances China-Pakistan relations. The promotion of Chinese language education aligns with China's global influence, making Chinese culture and language more accessible and appealing to Pakistan.

4.7 Economic and Political Cooperation

Several Chinese universities have played crucial roles in fostering economic and political collaboration between China and Pakistan, including Beijing Technology and Business University, Jiangxi University of Science and Technology, and Anhui Normal University.

Beijing Technology and Business University's annual international conferences and reports promote the BRI by facilitating technology and economic cooperation. Its role in advancing sustainable development aligns with China's long-term vision for economic growth and sectoral collaboration, which is pivotal to the region. Jiangxi University of Science and Technology's programs on China-Pakistan educational cooperation, research on cultural equivalence and utilization, and support for mining investment underscore the importance of academic research in strengthening economic ties.

Such initiatives provide relevant research and advisory services, contributing to mutual understanding and long-term economic development. Anhui Normal University's cooperation on projects related to China-Pakistan agricultural collaboration and counterterrorism, with reports adopted at the provincial level, actively contributes to the development of China-Pakistan relations. Its efforts in academic publications, project involvement, and international collaborations are vital in maintaining a harmonious partnership.

4.8 Specialized Research and Expertise

Specific universities, such as Sichuan University, China West Normal University, and Hebei University, have emerged as centers of specialized research and expertise, focusing on South Asian politics, economics, security, terrorism, and cultural differences.

Sichuan University's research on South Asian politics, economics, and culture is instrumental in advancing understanding of the region's political and economic dynamics. It also strengthens Sino-Indian studies, a critical factor in China's regional relations. China West Normal University's specialized research on Pakistan's security, terrorism, and foreign relations is of utmost importance in providing intellectual support for government decision-making and fostering academic exchange, political awareness, and mutual understanding between China and Pakistan. Hebei University's contributions to research papers, conferences, and collaborations with other research centers provide valuable insights into international relations, especially with the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. Such research enhances diplomatic ties and highlights the broader relevance of China-Pakistan relations.

4.9 Think Tanks and Policy Advisory

Some universities have acted as think tanks and provided policy advisory services, including Kashgar University, the South and Southeast Asian Research Institute, and the Communication University of China. Kashgar University, as a National Ethnic Affairs Commission research center, offers in-depth research on CPEC and regional issues. Its support for high-level research and economic development is pivotal in shaping policies and strategies. The South and Southeast Asian Research Institute's hosting of national-level projects and generation of high-level academic and think tank results significantly support China's overseas interests. These results help shape policies in economics, politics, and security, connecting China with the world. Communication University of China's role in hosting international conferences, conducting regional country research projects, and offering decision-making consultation services aligns with its ambition to become a top-



tier academic institution in Pakistan research. This supports China's Belt and Road Strategy and enhances people-to-people exchanges between China and Pakistan.

4.10 International and Regional Cooperation

Most universities actively participate in international cooperation and academic exchanges, thereby strengthening comprehensive cooperation between China and Pakistan. Northwest University and Southwest University of Political Science and Law are prime examples. Northwest University's facilitation of academic exchanges and hosting of Pakistani academic groups contribute to theoretical support and intellectual assistance for comprehensive cooperation between China and Pakistan.

These exchanges encompass economic, cultural, and academic facets, essential for long-term cooperation. The Southwest University of Political Science and Law's research on challenges, problems, and solutions in regional cooperation, primary key and general national-level projects, and high-end academic and think-tank achievements underscores its dedication to protecting China's overseas interests. This comprehensive approach ensures that academic and policy work aligns with China's goals and interests in the region.

5. Challenges and Difficulties Against PSCs

Based on data collected from the official website, interviews with members/heads of the PSCs, and documents provided by the centers, the following challenges and difficulties are identified among the PSCs.

5.1 Institutional and Structural Challenges

Limited Funding and Resources: All the PSCs are not independent research institutes; they are managed by specific university departments and, as a result, are not financially independent. When conducting research, they must apply through either the university or the local government, which, in turn, may not consistently meet the demands of extensive research and activities. Without adequate financial support, the PSCs face difficulties organizing conferences, conducting academic research, publishing research results, and developing related programs.

5.2 Language Barrier

Urdu, Pakistan's national language, is not widely taught or understood within Chinese universities, where Mandarin and English predominate. This language barrier poses a significant challenge for students and researchers aiming to research Pakistan. Difficulties accessing primary source materials and effective communication with Pakistani counterparts may hinder comprehensive research.

5.3 Human Resource and Expertise Challenges

Lack of a Talent Pipeline: Since BRI and CPEC were announced only in one decade, the current heads of the centers are mostly retired professors whose research focused on South Asia or international relations. A significant proportion of students graduating with expertise in Urdu or Pakistan studies opt for careers in other fields rather than pursuing Pakistan studies. They may choose alternative career paths or academic disciplines. This trend suggests that PSCs struggle to establish a continuous pipeline of young researchers and scholars specializing in Pakistan studies, potentially leading to a shortage of qualified faculty and researchers.

5.4 Research Focus and Depth Challenges

Published research output from PSCs often focuses on specific aspects of Pakistan studies, such as the CPEC, security, and educational exchanges. Given the region's geopolitical complexities, scholars and researchers affiliated with PSCs may face difficulties conducting fieldwork to collect firsthand data or conduct surveys in Pakistan. In some cases, the security situation in the region can pose challenges to fieldwork and research activities in Pakistan.

Researchers may lack access to in-depth, on-the-ground data and experiences, primarily due to their base in China. The narrow focus limits the diversity and depth of their research, potentially limiting their contributions to a comprehensive understanding of Pakistan's complex dynamics. Without in-depth fieldwork, research may lack the rich context and nuanced understanding necessary for comprehensive analysis, thereby affecting the quality and depth of research produced by the centers ([Jiangxi University of & Technology](#)).

5.5 Lack of Unified Information Sharing and Mechanisms

The PSCs in Chinese universities are established under different academic institutions. These centers vary significantly in terms of their establishment timelines, the number of researchers, research quality, center size, areas of focus, and societal impact. Each PSC independently formulates its research tasks, assessment methods, and future development plans, lacking a unified mechanism for information sharing. From 2007 to 2022, the PSCs in Chinese universities primarily conducted independent research without a collaborative research mechanism.

So far, a comprehensive collaboration mechanism for all the PSCs remains in the air ([Kashgar](#)). However, a significant change occurred in 2023. In early 2023, the Pakistan Study Center at Inner Mongolia Honder College of Arts and Sciences jointly proposed the establishment of the "China-Pakistan Research Alliance" with The Centre for BRI and China Studies, Islamabad, Pakistan ([Pakistan Research Center](#)).

In April 2023, leaders of PSCs from Inner Mongolia Honder College of Arts and Sciences, Jiangsu Normal University, Jiangxi University of Science and Technology, Northern Minzu University, Southwest University of Political Science and Law, Hebei Normal University, and Hebei University, along with their counterparts from Pakistan, including the Islamabad Institute for Peace and Diplomacy, University of Peshawar, Islamabad Institute of Information Technology, Quaid-i-Azam University, Azad Jammu and Kashmir University, and Khunjerab International University, successfully organized the inaugural meeting of the China-Pakistan Research Alliance via an online conference ([Tang, 2022](#)).

This marked the initiation of cooperation and information sharing among domestic PSCs. In June 2023, the Pakistan Study Center at Kashgar University in Xinjiang held the "2023The 2nd Muztagata Forum – International Symposium on CPEC". It introduced the proposal for the "China-Pakistan Economic Corridor Think Tank Collaboration Mechanism" ([Raza et al., 2023](#)). Although more practical mechanisms are expected, the above updates signal a significant shift toward unified cooperation among PSCs in China.

6. Implications and Recommendations

These study centers, numbering 21 from 2007 to 2022, have played a vital role in fostering academic collaboration, cultural understanding, and research exchange between China and Pakistan. With their diverse research areas and geographic distribution, the PSCs reflect China's commitment to engaging comprehensively with Pakistan and to nurturing a deeper understanding of its socio-political landscape.

6.1 Strategic Significance of Pakistan

The establishment of 21 PSCs across Chinese universities from 2007 to 2022 underscores Pakistan's growing strategic significance in the context of the BRI and CPEC. These centers signify China's commitment to comprehensively understanding and engaging with Pakistan. They serve as platforms for in-depth research, academic collaboration, and cultural exchanges, fostering a deeper understanding of Pakistan's political, economic, and social landscape. The presence of these study centers highlights China's recognition of Pakistan's strategic importance as a key partner in its regional and global initiatives, emphasizing the need for enhanced academic and cultural exchanges to strengthen bilateral ties ([Sina, 2008](#)).

6.2 Cultural and Academic Exchanges

The diverse research areas and achievements of the PSCs have led to increased cultural and academic exchanges between China and Pakistan. These centers have promoted educational collaboration, cultural understanding, and the dissemination of knowledge about Pakistan. Through language programs, cultural events, and academic conferences, the PSCs facilitate interactions and dialogues between Chinese and Pakistani students, scholars, and policymakers. These exchanges contribute to mutual learning, intercultural understanding, and the building of lasting people-to-people connections. The PSCs also play a crucial role in promoting Urdu language education in China, further enhancing cultural understanding and communication between the two nations ([Northwest, 2020](#)).

6.3 Regional Distribution

The geographic distribution of the PSCs across different provinces demonstrates China's intention to cultivate a nationwide network of resources dedicated to Pakistan studies. This reflects the comprehensive nature of China-Pakistan cooperation and signifies the importance of the relationship between the BRI and CPEC. By



establishing study centers in various regions, China aims to foster a deeper understanding of Pakistan's diverse regional dynamics, culture, and socioeconomic aspects ([Hongguang, 1997](#)). It also enables localized research, engagement with local communities, and exploration of regional cooperation opportunities. This regional distribution strategy showcases China's commitment to developing a nuanced understanding of Pakistan and strengthening ties at both the national and regional levels ([Hebei, 2015](#)).

6.4 Historical Growth Stages

The three stages of development, from pioneering centers to steady growth and continued expansion, reflect China's evolving commitment to Pakistan studies. It aligns with China's strategic objectives regarding the BRI and CPEC and demonstrates a deliberate, consistent approach to establishing PSCs ([Peking University, 2008](#)). The initial establishment of pioneering centers laid the foundation for Pakistani studies in Chinese universities, paving the way for subsequent growth and expansion ([Han, 2022](#)).

As the centers matured, they diversified their research focus, expanded collaborations, and enhanced academic output. This historical growth trajectory demonstrates China's recognition of the long-term significance of Pakistan studies and its commitment to nurturing a robust academic ecosystem focused on Pakistan's multidimensional aspects. The continued expansion of PSCs signifies China's dedication to deepening academic research, fostering cultural understanding, and facilitating meaningful engagement with Pakistan.

7. Recommendations

Based on the above findings and discussion, the following recommendations are put forward.

1. **Resource Allocation:** Adequate financial resources must be allocated by Chinese universities and relevant authorities to ensure the sustained operation and development of the PSCs. Financial independence and ample funding will empower these centers to undertake extensive research, host conferences, and facilitate comprehensive academic activities.
2. **Language Proficiency:** Recognizing the language barrier with Urdu, universities should consider incorporating Urdu language courses into their academic offerings for researchers and students interested in Pakistan studies. Proficiency in Urdu is paramount for effective research and communication with Pakistani counterparts, enabling more profound insights and more meaningful exchanges.
3. **Talent Development:** Deliberate efforts should be made to establish a talent pipeline specifically designed to nurture expertise in Pakistani studies. Encouraging students with a strong command of the Urdu language or a keen interest in Pakistani studies to pursue careers in this field is of utmost importance. Offering scholarships, fellowships, and academic incentives can attract and retain young researchers, ensuring a sustainable pool of qualified faculty and scholars.
4. **Fieldwork Opportunities:** To enhance research quality, it is imperative to facilitate opportunities for in-depth fieldwork in Pakistan. This can be achieved through establishing partnerships with Pakistani institutions or providing support for on-the-ground data collection, even in areas with challenging security situations. Such fieldwork experiences will enrich research outcomes and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the intricacies within Pakistan.
5. **Collaboration Mechanisms:** While some collaborative initiatives have commenced, further efforts should be undertaken to establish a cohesive information-sharing and research collaboration mechanism among the PSCs. This will foster a unified approach to China-Pakistan studies, promote effective collaboration, and enable researchers to leverage each other's expertise and insights.
6. **Global Perspective:** PSCs should strive to develop a global perspective in their research endeavors. Understanding Pakistan within the broader context of international relations is crucial for conducting comprehensive analyses and generating insights with global relevance. This global outlook will enhance the academic standing and impact of the PSCs.
7. **Publications and Dissemination:** It is essential to provide support for the publication and dissemination of research findings originating from the PSCs. This includes facilitating the publication of academic papers, reports, and other forms of knowledge sharing. By disseminating their research outcomes widely, the PSCs can contribute to the broader academic discourse and maximize their societal impact.
8. **Long-Term Vision:** A long-term vision should be developed for the PSCs, ensuring their continued growth and relevance in the ever-evolving China-Pakistan relationship. This necessitates adaptability to new strategic developments and priorities within the BRI and the CPEC, while upholding academic rigor and

promoting multidisciplinary research.

9. Collaboration with Pakistani Counterparts: Strengthening ties and fostering collaboration with Pakistani institutions and research centers is vital for the PSCs. This two-way academic exchange will facilitate a deeper understanding of each other's cultures, perspectives, and research interests, thereby fostering mutual learning and enriching the academic landscape.

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study provides a comprehensive overview of 21 PSCs established across various Chinese universities and institutions, including their historical context, geographical distribution, development stages, research focus areas, achievements, and challenges. The establishment of these centers underscores Pakistan's strategic importance within the BRI.

The historical growth stages of the PSCs demonstrate China's evolving emphasis on Pakistan studies, culminating in a continued commitment to expanding these centers. These developments signify China's dedication to strengthening cultural exchange, academic research, and cooperation with Pakistan, which is of enduring importance in China's foreign policy and academic endeavors.

The achievements of the PSCs are noteworthy, spanning academic and research collaborations, cultural ties, language education, economic and political cooperation, specialized research, and policy advisories. These centers serve as crucial think tanks and foster international and regional cooperation, contributing to a deeper understanding of Pakistan and China-Pakistan relations.

However, the PSCs face several challenges, including limited funding, language barriers, a need for a talent pipeline, issues with research focus and depth, and a lack of unified information-sharing and mechanisms. Addressing these challenges is essential to ensuring the sustained growth and impact of the PSCs. The implications of this study highlight the strategic significance of Pakistan, the importance of cultural and academic exchanges, the regional distribution of PSCs, and the historical stages of growth that have shaped these centers.

Recommendations include allocating adequate financial resources, addressing language proficiency issues, nurturing a talent pipeline, facilitating fieldwork opportunities, establishing collaboration mechanisms, promoting a global perspective, supporting publications and dissemination, developing a long-term vision, and strengthening collaboration with Pakistani counterparts. To continue their valuable contributions, addressing the identified challenges and implementing the recommended strategies is vital. These centers are poised to remain integral in the academic, cultural, and policy aspects of the China-Pakistan relationship, contributing to a brighter shared future for both nations.

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Data availability

The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines, and all necessary approvals were obtained.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.



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